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Paper

Title: Agility and Independence Based on the Challenges of the PKA Polish Accreditation Committee

Abstract

Agility, understood as the capacity to respond swiftly to change and adapt to evolving stakeholder expectations, is increasingly regarded as a crucial operational objective for quality assurance agencies. This need is especially acute in the current environment, marked by internationalization (including cross-border education), the expansion of online teaching and learning, the rapid development of AI tools, and mounting concerns over democratic values. Although the literature thoroughly explores the factors underpinning agility in higher education, it is acknowledged that agile decision-making relies on minimising organisational interdependencies and establishing clear lines of authority and responsibility. In accordance with ESG Standard 3.3, agencies are required to operate independently and

autonomously, assuming full responsibility for their activities and outcomes without external interference. The authors argue that adherence to this standard is essential for cultivating agility within quality assurance agencies. Using the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA) as a case study, this paper investigates challenges related to organisational decision-making, highlighting how the PKA's lack of legal personality and dedicated resources limits its control over key operational matters; for instance, challenges in the evaluation process based on the European Approach. This article discusses potential reforms to uphold academic standards and guarantee the delivery of high-quality education and research during periods of disruption. It examines which legal and organisational instruments might enhance the responsiveness of quality assurance agencies to global challenges, thereby fostering resilience and adaptability within the Higher Education sector and stimulating significant innovation and transformation. Drawing on the case of the PKA, the paper also explores the reforms necessary to institutionalise these advances, ensuring that quality assurance agencies remain agile in meeting future uncertainties. The PKA's experience is intended to prompt dialogue among quality assurance bodies across the EHEA.

Agile – What Does It Mean in Management?

Agile is a process management methodology that originated in software development. Its founding date is generally considered to be 2001, when the Manifesto for Agile Software Development[1] was published:

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it.

Through this work we have come to value:

- *Individuals and interactions over processes and tools*
- *Working software over comprehensive documentation*
- *Customer collaboration over contract negotiation*
- *Responding to change over following a plan*

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

Agile assumes that process management is implemented in short cycles, enabling efficient collection of feedback on a given solution. Therefore, cooperation among all stakeholders in the solution is crucial.

Publications emphasise that Agile methods lead to better communication and feedback due to small iterations and customer interaction[2]. Another advantage of Agile, although less direct, is the development of an organisational culture based on feedback and trust, recognising that mistakes are a normal part of the process[3].

However, Agile also has some negative consequences. The test stage presents problems because it sometimes creates risks that the team lacks the skills to address. The test stage is difficult to plan in terms of cost and time. Therefore, it requires a highly skilled team capable of continuously delivering solutions to problems that arise during testing. The creativity of team members is crucial. In the waterfall method, it is easier to plan this stage and there are fewer requirements for the team members[4].

[1] https://agilemanifesto.org/, access: 2025.10.01
[2] Peterson and Wohlin 2010; Svensson and Höst 2005; Karlström and Runeson 2005; Bahli and Abou-Zeid 2005
[3] Medini, Taleb, and Zimmermann 2025
[4] eg. Peterson and Wohlin 2010, Medini, Taleb, and Zimmermann 2025, Brdulak 2012

What Could Agile Mean in Quality Assurance in Higher Education?

Agility is perceived as a method that fosters an organisational culture focused on delivering solutions rather than problems. At the same time, Agile methods can only be used by highly skilled staff. In the Higher Education (HE) sector, the second statement is particularly relevant, as HE is characterised by highly skilled staff. There is a need for discussion on whether an organisational culture centred on delivering solutions is crucial for HE.

In HE, academic values are especially emphasised. The latest ministerial communiqué from Tirana listed the main fundamental values[5]:

- Academic integrity
- Institutional autonomy
- Participation of students and staff in higher education governance
- Public responsibility for higher education
- Public responsibility of higher education

However, the term 'quality culture' is more commonly used as a kind of holy grail for quality assurance mechanisms at higher education institutions (HEIs). According to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015)[6], quality assurance and quality enhancement are interrelated. They can support the development of a quality culture that is embraced by all, from students and academic staff to institutional leadership and management.

Quality culture at HEIs should primarily support teaching and learning. The external result of effective teaching and learning is the increasing value of HEI graduates to society – the general stakeholders of HEIs. At the same time, quality culture is required not only from HEIs but also from institutions that play a crucial role in quality assurance, such as agencies. These requirements are described in the ESG, chapters 2 and 3.

Independence of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015 and Agility

As already highlighted, agility is directly linked to effective communication. It is not possible to introduce Agile methods if communication disrupts the flow of information, especially feedback from stakeholders.

If we look at ESG standards, we can see in the standard 3.3 that quality assurance agencies (QAA) should be independent. The standard says *Agencies should be independent and act autonomously*. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

According to guidelines, independence of an agency means:

1. Organisational independence
2. Operational independence
3. Independence of formal outcomes

Effective communication requires a clear organisational structure, which includes defined responsibilities and a transparent flow of information. If agencies rely on highly skilled staff – one of the

[5] Tirana 2024
[6] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2015

conditions for agility – communication should be as open and trust-based as possible, enabling staff to act independently and be creative. This raises the question: is the status of agencies simple, clear, and well designed in terms of information flow?

Looking at ESG standards, we can observe that some standards interact. If we analyse independence from a communication perspective, it is also worth considering standard 3.5 Resources. This standard states: Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work (ESG 2015).

Currently, communication requires certain resources. Dedicated IT infrastructure is needed, for example, to enable remote work. Therefore, independence and resources are correlated – the organisation cannot be independent if it does not have an adequate level of resources.

Another ESG standard that interacts with independence is an official status. This standard says: Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities. The standard focuses on the outcomes of the agencies' processes – it should be accepted within their higher education system by the state, stakeholders, and the public. Although the intention of this standard is clear, this requirement may also create some confusion in the flow of information. Legal acts are a type of instruction and often also define procedures which contain the flow of information. If they are too detailed, it might limit the operational independence of an agency to efficiently change its procedures. Agile is based on flexibility, quick decisions, and rapid information flow. Therefore, simplicity is generally expected from organisations using agile.

The agility of the QAA may also be demonstrated through its openness to diverse activities and the facilitation of broad stakeholder engagement in shaping policies and daily practices. An equally critical aspect is the agency's capacity to operate within different legal frameworks and adapt to specific national contexts, particularly in the evaluation of joint programmes and transnational education, where flexibility in addressing diverse regulatory requirements is imperative. The regular publication of analyses grounded in the agency's activities supports the prompt identification of emerging trends and challenges, while the adoption of an agile methodology enables dynamic responses to such challenges and the proactive promotion of best practices. Furthermore, the implementation of continuous improvement mechanisms is essential, as it fosters swift detection and resolution of issues alongside the systematic enhancement of existing processes. Additionally, periodic external audits provide vital opportunities for reflection, validation of practices, and necessary adjustments, embodying the core principles of organisational agility. The interplay of agility and independence equips the agency to effectively respond to evolving socio-economic conditions and the shifting needs of students and society at large. Decision-making is informed solely by the expertise and experience of specialists drawn from diverse academic backgrounds, insulated from external pressures or vested interests. Quality assurance agencies must maintain an orientation towards openness and excellence, enabling them to accommodate novel educational modalities, digitalisation, internationalisation, and the ongoing refinement of pedagogical processes.

Agility and independence – what challenges does the Polish Accreditation Committee face?

The contemporary world compels quality assurance agencies, including the Polish Accreditation Committee, to be prepared for continual change and adaptation within the dynamic landscape of higher education. Consequently, it is requisite for evaluation and opinion-forming procedures to exhibit flexibility, allowing responsiveness to the specific needs of institutions and evolving legal requirements, including the capacity to adjust timelines and scope of analysis. The engagement of diverse stakeholders — including academic staff, students, and employers — in assessment and opinion processes facilitates decision-making that incorporates multiple perspectives

and ensures prompt communication of effectiveness. Openness to emerging forms of communication, such as remote site visits and electronic document workflows, further enhances operational efficiency and responsiveness. Detailed procedural frameworks, inclusive of appeals mechanisms that accommodate individualised considerations alongside systematic controls and oversight, safeguard against arbitrariness and reinforce accountability, forming a critical foundation for an effective and autonomous system. It is also essential that the language employed in procedural documentation is clear and accessible to a broad audience, a challenging task given the prevalence of complex legal terminology. Moreover, agencies should be equipped with tools to address the crisis of democratic values, such as initiatives promoting a culture of quality and the widespread advocacy for continuous improvement in education.

Challenges for PKA in effectively supporting the development of higher education in Poland include maintaining a balance between independence and flexibility: while preserving autonomy and impartiality, PKA must also possess the capacity for rapid adaptation to changing demands, the growing prevalence of cross-border joint education, and the integration of innovations such as digitalisation and the pervasive influence of artificial intelligence. PKA's current status[7] permits certain innovations; however, a more concise and flexible operational framework could further optimise agency performance. To meet increasing demands and intensify quality assurance activities, agile resource management is imperative to ensure appropriate expertise and funding, coupled with a streamlined organisational structure that empowers genuine operational agency. For instance, granting PKA legal personality could facilitate more fluid decision-making and clarify accountability. Additionally, the tension between PKA's 'accountability' mandate and its advisory role creates challenges, as the agency ought to navigate seamlessly between procedures that support institutions in process enhancement and those that address dishonest practices.

The Polish Accreditation Committee, established as an independent statutory body under the Higher Education Act, exhibits a certain capacity for swift adaptation in response to the evolving landscape of higher education in Poland. This adaptability is exemplified by the timely integration of evaluation criteria pertinent to online and distance learning modalities following the upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic[8]. Notwithstanding these advances, the attainment of comprehensive institutional agility necessitates the introduction of several strategic enhancements and requires professionalisation in many areas. Data show that only 52,3% of study programmes in Poland were evaluated. The agency is 23 years old and, since 2002, has not changed significantly in terms of institutional governance, formal status, and the number of staff workers. For example, the PKA office has 23 staff 2025 and had about 15 staff in 2002. At the same time, the number of study programmes delivered in Poland (1st and 2nd cycle) increased from 2398 in 2002 to 10735 in 2025[9]. The massification is one of the current trends needed to answer by national quality assurance agencies. It is also imperative to articulate and institutionalise robust procedures for systematic monitoring and follow-up of programme evaluation, particularly with the trend towards an increasing number of programmes, in order to foster a culture of continuous quality enhancement. When considering agility in the QAA, legal status is essential as it enables PKA to operate efficiently, shortens the decision-making process, and assigns real responsibility to the person in charge of the agency – the President. Moreover, PKA, and in our opinion other European QAA as well, should develop effective procedures to demonstrate accountability. Once accountability is ensured, we can move towards the enhancement goal, as trust is necessary for providing advice. This requires continuous monitoring, especially of HEIs that are business-model based rather than mission-driven. In addition, PKA should have sufficient resources to minimise conflicts of interest among its members and office staff. This can only be achieved if the previous point

[7] https://pka.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/statut-PKA-tekst-ujednolicony-marzec-2024.pdf, access: 2025.10.30
[8] https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/PKA-external-review-report-1.pdf, access: 2025.10.30
[9] Sikora A. (2025), Akredytacje PKA – update do badania Ocena jakości kształcenia w polskich uczelniach, PKA

– the legal status – is addressed. At the same time, PKA should be protected from political influence, particularly when politics represent business-model HEIs. Furthermore, efforts to augment internationalisation must be expedited, incorporating an expanded engagement of international experts to enrich evaluative perspectives. Concurrently, the optimisation of digital infrastructure and the refinement of communication channels with all relevant stakeholders are important to ensuring operational efficacy. In pursuit of bolstering organisational independence, the establishment of transparent criteria and formalised protocols concerning the potential dismissal of the PKA President is essential. This measure should be complemented by enhanced formalisation of internal control mechanisms to consolidate governance structures. However, in line with best practices, such formalisation must retain a degree of organisational flexibility, ensuring the committee's capacity to navigate and efficaciously respond to the multifaceted and fluid challenges inherent in the domain of higher education quality assurance is preserved. Meeting all of the above conditions should bring PKA closer to achieving agility.

Balancing Independence and Agility: Lessons from the Polish Accreditation Committee for Quality Assurance Agencies

Other agencies within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) can draw several important lessons from the challenges faced by the Polish Accreditation Committee. Paramount among these is the imperative to maintain a careful balance between institutional independence and organisational agility. PKA's journey illustrates that while robust autonomy and impartiality underpin credible and trustworthy quality assurance systems, agencies must simultaneously cultivate sufficient flexibility and responsiveness to navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education. This includes addressing the complexities of transnational education, embracing digital transformation, and integrating emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Moreover, PKA's experience underscores the value of continuously enhancing digital infrastructure and streamlining communication channels to bolster operational efficiency and stakeholder engagement. A further lesson is the importance of developing transparent and regulated governance frameworks, particularly regarding leadership appointments and dismissals, to safeguard agency independence and reinforce public confidence. Equally important is the inclusive engagement of a broad spectrum of stakeholders, ranging from students to international experts, which serves to enrich evaluation processes through diverse perspectives and promotes inclusivity. Finally, it is important to explicitly address agile and effective resource management, encompassing both staffing competencies and financial provisions, in order to meet escalating quality assurance demands; articulate and manage the inherent tension between accountability mandates and advisory roles, enabling agencies to balance their supportive and regulatory functions; and develop robust mechanisms to shield agencies from undue political influence, particularly concerning stakeholders operating under market-oriented models. Collectively, these insights suggest that agencies across the EHEA benefit from embracing a governance model that is both adaptable and principled, supported by proactive technological adoption and stakeholder collaboration, thereby ensuring the resilience and relevance of quality assurance mechanisms in contemporary higher education contexts.

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